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AUTHOR Solomon, Mindy; Venuti, John; Hodges, Jilda; Iannuzzelli, Jena; Chambliss, Catherine

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ABSTRACT

College students confront a variety of challenges on a daily basis. Living up to the standards prescribed by the media and other social groups leaves some students feeling distraught and many feeling vulnerable. Feelings of failure and self-loathing often lead college students to become preoccupied with their self-image and actions, motivating them to make physical and psychological changes throughout their college years. Such self-examination sometimes results in bad choices. The current study examined body image satisfaction and perceptions among college students. Findings imply that both genders are socialized to judge their bodies according to a standard set by the media and society. It appears that females judge themselves more harshly against these standards than males do. Because of the numerous social activities that students report avoiding due to self-consciousness, it seems that society indirectly limits many individuals' freedom to enjoy life by promoting physical expectations they fail to meet. Understanding the problems faced by students can help in guiding their selection of appropriate adaptive responses. For this reason, it is important to address some of the challenges they face. (Contains 18 tables and 18 references.) (ADT)

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Educational Responses to Media Challenges to Self Esteem:

Body Image Perceptions Among Undergraduate Students

Mindy Solomon, John Venuti

Jilda Hodges, Jena Iannuzzelli

Catherine Chambliss, Ph.D.

Ursinus College

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Introduction

College students confront a variety of daunting challenges on a daily basis. Living up to the standards that are prescribed by the media and by other social groups leaves some feeling distraught and many feeling vulnerable. Feelings of failure and self-loathing often lead students to become preoccupied with their self-image and actions, motivating them to make physical and psychological changes and to adopt new habits throughout their college career.

Although the self-examination associated with the undergraduate experience often yields beneficial growth, it sometimes compels bad choices. Understanding the problems faced by students help us to guide their selection of appropriate, adaptive responses. For this reason, it is important to address some of the challenges that are faced by college students:

Concerns related to physique

As a nation, the United States is currently plagued with a serious body image problem. With over half of the United States' population being overweight and 18% being clinically obese (Goldberg, 2000), it can be argued that some response is imperative. However, many believe the media has unduly stepped in and through their exacting standards has excessively condemned the obese. The unusually svelte models that the media portrays as ideal have caused many to turn to unhealthy ways of trying to achieve these unrealistic and often unattainable looks. Eating disorders have risen in the past few years, and they are no longer largely exclusive to women. Men have also begun to feel the effects of rigid, perfectionistic body standards, and are experiencing increasing rates of anorexia,

bulimia, and other eating disorders. Currently, more than five million Americans suffer from eating disorders. Over 5% of adolescent and adult women and 1% of men have some form of eating disorder (The Elisa Project, 1998).

Concerns about one's failure to match the cultural standard also contaminate relationships. Men and women alike are frequently preoccupied with what others think about them. They feel that they are being compared by their significant others, friends, and family to the same-sex stars who appear on television, and are featured in advertisements and magazines. Nearly one-quarter of females studied reported that they felt uncomfortable watching female nudity with a male watching with them (Garman, Hodges, Iannuzzelli, Solomon, Venuti, & Chambliss, 2000). Similarly, over one-third of males were uncomfortable watching male nudity with a female present. More than 75% of males and 90% of women felt that the opposite sex compared them to media stars (Garman, et. al., 2000). This fear has led many to pursue a stringent standard of thinness. Females underestimate the body size males prefer; the body size women think males prefer is actually smaller than what males report they truly want (Hodges, Iannuzzelli, Solomon, Venuti, & Chambliss, 1999). Likewise, males have also underestimated the weight that women see as ideal, and as a result, the prevalence of eating disorders among males is on the rise (Stunkard, Sorensen, & Schulsinger, 1980).

Gender Differences in Body Image Perceptions

Society imposes increasingly stringent standards of physical attractiveness, emphasizing female slenderness and male muscularity. Because of

these rigid and exacting standards, females, in particular, have been found by many researchers to be highly dissatisfied with the overall appearance of their bodies. Not surprisingly, distortions in body image among women have been linked to chronic dieting, eating disorders, and decreased self-esteem. Increasingly, males also are subject to comparison with these standards of attractiveness, which has also led to an increase in incidence of eating disorders among males. Pressure to maintain taut abdominal muscles and ideally contoured buttocks, combined with a desire for high muscular definition, makes many men feel inadequate. More males are joining the self-critical ranks formerly dominated by females.

Females have consistently seen themselves as overweight, even those who are categorized as being of normal weight according to medical and actuarial data. In a study by Cohn and Adler (1992), male and female body figures, ideal figures, and perceived attractive figures for same-sex and opposite-sex peers were evaluated. It was found that the females' ideal was thinner than the ideal reported by males. Males also showed concern with their current status, feeling a need for a larger physique. Again, the opposite sex did not find this larger physique attractive.

In an extension of the work conducted by Cohn and Adler (1992), the study described in this chapter examined body image satisfaction and perceptions among college students. The body scale employed by Stunkard, Sorensen, and Schulsinger (1980) was used to determine the current shape of the subject's own body and the participant's perception of the ideal male and female body shape.

Although many young adults are critical of their own bodies, often others see them as quite acceptable. The incongruence between personal and public expectations of body size and proportions is important to explore. More accurate information about others' standards may reduce perfectionistic self-derogation.

Females' Risk of Negative Body Image

One of the most common and distressing problems reported by young women today involves concern about their physical appearance. A large percentage of current female college and university students have been found to be highly dissatisfied with the overall appearance of their bodies. Not surprisingly, negative body image has been linked to chronic dieting, eating disorders, and decreased self-esteem. In a society that emphasizes a cultural ideal of female slenderness, it is no surprise that there are many people with disruptive disturbances in body image. Ironically, as the cultural ideal for women continues to get thinner, women in general have been getting heavier. This leaves a growing percentage of the female population falling outside the acceptable weight range. Women have become so concerned with their appearance and the excessively demanding media ideal that 27% of those who fall in the normal weight category actually classify themselves as overweight (Paxon, Wertheim, Gibbons, Szmukler, Hillter, & Petrovich, 1991). The self-esteem of many girls is jeopardized as they make comparisons between their own bodies and those of same-sex television stars who have been selected for their rare, sleek body types.

Documentation of pervasive body dissatisfaction among females was obtained half a century ago. For instance, Secord and Jourard (1952) conducted a

study that examined body-cathexis, which is defined as satisfactory or dissatisfactory feelings toward various parts of the body. Body-cathexis is believed to be related to, yet a separate part of, one's self-concept. Subjects participating in this study indicated on a scale the direction and strength of feeling about various body parts and functions to permit the researchers to appraise body-cathexis. No female participants reported that they "consider myself fortunate" for any of the body categories. Women did, however, indicate "having strong feelings and wishing change could somehow be made" regarding facial complexion, appetite, hands, energy level, ears, body build, skin texture, knees, and weight (Secord & Jourard, 1952). Results indicate that females cathect their bodies in either direction more often than men, as suggested by more male responses of "have no particular feelings one way or the other" toward various body parts (Secord & Jourard, 1952).

Another study showing widespread body dissatisfaction among females was conducted by Paxton, et. al. (1991). Their study examined the perceived impact of being thinner, as well as satisfaction with physical fitness. Self-report questionnaires were administered to 341 female and 221 male high school students in Melbourne, Australia. In addition, an experimenter took height and weight measurements of all participants. Results indicated a considerable amount of body dissatisfaction among adolescents, most prominently among girls (fewer girls than boys reported being happy with their weight). Girls anticipated that being thinner would affect their happiness in a positive manner. Interestingly,

27% of the girls who fell within the normal weight range classified themselves as overweight.

In another more recent study, Cash and Henry (1995) investigated body image perceptions of adult women in the United States. Analysis of 803 participants' responses on the Multidimensional Body-Self Relations Questionnaire indicated substantial levels of body dissatisfaction among females. Nearly half of the participants reported negative evaluations regarding their looks. Furthermore, they expressed concern about being or becoming overweight. While only a small number of respondents indicated unhappiness with their upper torso, facial features, height and hair, the majority of participants indicated dissatisfaction with their middle or lower torso, weight, and muscle tone. Cash and Henry (1995) concluded that women express a more negative body image than men.

Interested in examining gender differences in the nature, realism, and correlates of body image, Mintz and Betz (1986) designed a study investigating satisfaction with one's body as it corresponds to perceived versus actual body size. The study also examined the relationship between body image and self-esteem. The 264 participants who volunteered were members of an introductory psychology course at a large university. Participants completed scales assessing body-cathexis, self-esteem, depression proneness, sex role ideology, and perceptions of weight and dieting activities. Results were consistent with the notion that college women are less satisfied with their bodies than college men. College women tended to perceive themselves as overweight. Data indicated a

body distortion among college women in that female participants consistently perceive themselves as heavier than they actually are. In fact, the only women who perceived themselves as "normal" were those who were actually slightly underweight.

Consistent with the results obtained by Mintz and Betz (1986) are the findings from a study by Lundy and Schlafer (1959). Interested in perceptions across genders, the study conducted by Lundy and Schlafer (1959) compared the degree of satisfaction with body and facial features between males and females. Additionally, the researchers compared males' and females' ratings of the level of attractiveness of various male body builds. A total of 306 subjects completed a "body concept" questionnaire containing thirteen items pertaining to the extent of satisfaction with each physical feature described. A slide presentation was used to obtain ratings of seven male figures. Results indicated that on average females want to be seven pounds lighter. Overall, females were more satisfied with their height than males. Data also showed that females desire smaller hips and waists, thinner arms and legs, and larger busts. Although both genders identified the nose as the facial feature they wanted to change the most, females were overall less happy with their facial features than males.

Likewise, in a study conducted by Page and Allen (1995), females expressed widespread dissatisfaction with body size. Subjects rated satisfaction with current body weight on a five-point scale. They also rated their current weight as much too thin, a little too thin, just right, a little too fat, or much too fat. Females perceived both being much too fat or a little too fat as dissatisfying.

Males' Risk of Negative Body Image

As a result of changing societal values and increasing concern with appearances, many believe that men now more actively strive for more muscular bodies. The culture prizes highly muscular men, leaving many men feeling too thin. This notion is supported by the results of numerous research studies. McKay, Parks, and Read (1997) studied body image concerns of football players and cross-country runners. Surveys were administered asking about eating habits, weight concerns, physical characteristics, perceived and ideal body shape, and exercise reasons. Both groups wanted to be taller. While football players wanted to gain weight, cross-country subjects tended to be happy with their weight. Cross-country athletes had more disturbed attitudes toward eating, with bulimia and oral control being of significant concern. Overall, football players had a more positive perception of self, while cross-country subjects were not as satisfied with themselves physically.

Results obtained by Lundy and Schlafer (1959) provided early evidence that males often feel the need to gain weight. Through analysis of responses to the "body concept" questionnaire and evaluations of a slide presentation, Lundy and Schlafer (1959) concluded that males wish to have wider shoulders, and thicker arms and legs. Additionally, the researchers found that males wished to be three pounds heavier (Lundy & Schlafer, 1959). Analogously, results of analysis of the numerous scales used by Mintz and Betz (1985) in their study indicated that men perceived themselves as needing to gain weight. Congruent with this, Paxton, et. al. (1991) reported that boys thought that being thinner

would have a negative effect on their happiness. The results obtained by Page and Allen (1995) attest to the notion that males are dissatisfied with being either much too thin or a little too thin.

There are indicators that both males and females often not only have distorted perceptions of self, but also frequently misconstrue what the opposite sex is looking for in them. Cohn and Adler (1992) studied ideal body image by looking at the 87 female and 118 male participants' body figure, their ideal figure, what they perceived to be the most attractive image to same-sex peers, and the most attractive image to opposite-sex peers. These characteristics were measured using single item self-report questions and a twelve-item survey on dieting habits. Results indicated that the males' ideals, their current status, and the peer-perceived ideal were all quite consistent, falling at the 4.5 level on the Stunkard, et. al. (1980) body scale. On the other hand, females believed that peers preferred them to be underweight, and that they were heavier than they wished to be. Using Stunkard, et. al. (1980), females currently rated themselves as being at 4.1 while the peer-perceived ideal was estimated to be at 2.9. Their own ideal, and what they believed was considered attractive, fell between their actual body size and the supposed "peer ideals." Cohn and Adler (1992) concluded that while females wished to be skinnier than the opposite sex desired, males yearned for larger chests and arms, although larger physiques were not as attractive to females.

Fallon and Rozin (1985) examined both dissatisfaction with current appearance and distortions in estimating the attractiveness preferences of the opposite sex by comparing ratings of participants' current figures, and their

ratings of most attractive figures by the subject and by members of the opposite sex. Students in Introductory Psychology classes, including 227 females and 248 males, completed a one-page survey. Students recorded their sex and estimated the number of students at the university of their sex and height who were heavier than they were. In addition, participants were presented with a nine figure drawing of each sex, depicting cases ranging from thin to very heavy. Students indicated the figure they perceived to be their current figure, how they wanted to look, what they thought was most attractive to the opposite sex, and what they found most attractive in the opposite sex. Results suggested that the current, ideal, and most attractive figure, are almost identical for men. In addition, men distort women's actual preferences to bring them in line with their own current figure. However, women perceive their current figures to be heavier than both their ideal and than what they believe men's preferences to be. Females' views of men's preferences are consistent with their views of the ideal women's figure. Fallon and Rozin (1985) found that women believe that "men desire women who are thinner than what women currently perceive themselves to be." These researchers' data suggest that women are misinformed and overestimate the magnitude of thinness that men desire.

Given the potential negative consequences of this tendency for females to strive for a low weight they imagine men to value, it is important to clarify men's actual tastes. The present study extends this earlier work examining body image satisfaction and perceptions among college students, in order to provide both

males and females with more accurate information about the actual preferences of members of the opposite sex.

Methods

Participants

The sample consisted of 114 undergraduate students, 70 of which were female and 44 of which were male, who volunteered to complete the survey instrument. All participants were full-time students enrolled in various psychology courses at a small liberal arts college.

Survey Instrument

The survey consisted of the nine-figure body scale developed and used by Stunkard, et. al. (1980). Participants were asked to indicate where they currently fell on the scale, as well as where the ideal male and female fell on the scale. In addition, participants were asked to indicate on a 5-point Likert scale (1= excessively small, 2= somewhat small, 3= just right, 4= somewhat large, and 5= excessively large) their personal opinions about specific body parts, as well as the views they believed were held by the opposite sex. Participants also answered questions concerning past and present use of various weight control techniques. Furthermore, participants responded to a variety of general items regarding personal behaviors.

Results

A significant gender difference emerged on the view of the ideal female body shape. Females viewed this ideal as significantly thinner than the males.

Male ratings of ideal male physiques were not significantly different from female ratings of these physiques (see Table A).

Both males and females agreed that the opposite sex prefers large breasts or pecs. Males and females also agreed that tight, round buttocks and tight, defined abdominal muscles are preferred by the opposite sex (see Table B).

Several significant differences emerged between the sexes with females expressing more negative feelings than males (see Table F). Females indicated feeling more distressed by their current weight. Females indicated a stronger perceived need to lose weight. There was also a greater dissatisfaction with the shape of their buttocks among females. Additionally, women were more likely to avoid public exercise and draw negative comparisons between themselves and same sex media stars. Males were significantly more likely than women to have used dietary supplements, including creatine and to feel the need to gain weight (see Table L).

Thirty two percent of all participants indicated avoiding public showers because they are self-conscious. The beach/pool was indicated as being avoided by 24% of the overall sample. Seven percent of participants avoided parties or the club scene, and 4% indicated avoiding eating in public. Clothes shopping was avoided by 5% of participants. Only 2% of participants avoided food shopping and dating because they were self-conscious.

Table A

Ideal Female and Male Shape

		N	Mean	Std. Deviation	t	df	p
Female Shape	Male	31	3.55	0.51	2.24	95	.03
	Female	66	3.29	0.55			
Male Shape	Male	42	4.29	0.71	-.626	105	.53
	Female	65	4.37	0.65			

Table B

Opposite Sexes Breast/Pecs, Buttocks, and Abdomen

		N	Mean	Std. Deviation	t	df	p
Chest	Male	44	4.00	0.81	0.00	112	1.00
	Female	70	4.00	0.66			
Buttocks	Male	44	4.25	0.84	1.57	112	0.12
	Female	70	4.03	0.66			
Abdomen	Male	44	4.20	0.76	1.48	112	0.14
	Female	70	3.99	0.77			

Table C

Large Chest/Pecs

	Female percent	Male percent
Strongly disagree	0	2.3
Disagree	1.4	0
Neutral	17.4	18.2
Agree	61.4	54.5
Strongly agree	20.0	25.0

Table D

Tight, Round Buttocks

	Female percent	Male percent
Strongly disagree	0	2.3
Disagree	1.4	0
Neutral	15.7	11.4
Agree	61.4	43.2
Strongly agree	21.4	43.2

Table E

Tight, Defined Abs

	Female percent	Male percent
Strongly disagree	1.4	2.3
Disagree	1.4	0
Neutral	17.1	6.8
Agree	57.1	56.8
Strongly agree	22.9	34.1

Table F

Negative Social Comparisons and Weight Loss

		N	Mean	Std. Deviation	t	df	p
Distress	Male	44	2.91	0.98	-2.30	112	0.02
	Female	70	3.33	0.93			
Weight Loss	Male	44	2.91	1.39	-3.60	112	0.001
	Female	70	3.77	1.14			
Butt	Male	44	3.00	0.72	-2.98	112	0.004
	Female	70	3.39	0.64			
Public Exercise	Male	44	1.89	1.08	-2.23	112	0.03
	Female	70	2.40	1.27			
Social Comparisons	Male	44	2.82	1.13	-2.76	112	0.007
	Female	70	3.43	1.16			

Table G

Distress

	Female percent	Male percent
Strongly disagree	2.9	9.1
Disagree	14.3	18.2
Neutral	38.6	52.3
Agree	35.7	13.6
Strongly agree	8.6	6.8

Table H

Lose Weight

	Female percent	Male percent
Strongly disagree	8.6	22.7
Disagree	4.3	18.2
Neutral	14.3	18.2
Agree	47.1	27.3
Strongly agree	25.7	13.6

Table J

Public Exercise

	Female percent	Male percent
Strongly disagree	30.0	47.7
Disagree	30.0	29.5
Neutral	17.1	11.4
Agree	15.7	9.1
Strongly agree	7.1	2.3

Table K

Social Comparisons

	Female percent	Male percent
Strongly disagree	8.6	11.4
Disagree	12.9	31.8
Neutral	21.4	27.3
Agree	41.4	22.7
Strongly agree	15.7	6.8

Table L

Creatine Use and Weight Gain

		N	Mean	Std. Deviation	t	df	p
Creatine	Male	44	1.55	0.50	-3.41	112	0.001
	Female	70	1.83	0.38			
Weight Gain	Male	44	2.41	1.15	6.10	112	0.001
	Female	70	1.34	0.72			

Table M

Gain Weight

	Female percent	Male percent
Strongly disagree	2.9	2.3
Disagree	70.0	25.0
Neutral	18.6	22.7
Agree	7.1	29.5
Strongly agree	1.4	20.5

Discussion

The results suggest that there is a single ideal female body shape, and this oftentimes exclusionary standard is more extreme in the minds of females. Seemingly, females desire to be somewhat thinner than what males find most attractive in females. Historically, females have consistently desired to be thinner than average. Recently, as television and movies have grown in popularity and the average media star is considerably underweight, females' weight expectations have become progressively more extreme.

Unlike females, males conceptualize the ideal male physique in ways that parallel the opposite sex. Apparently males are fairly accurate in their readings of females' preferences, resulting in estimates of the ideal male physique that were similar to the actual ratings women gave.

An interesting finding involved each sexes' beliefs about the opposite sexes' particular preferences regarding the specific body areas. Both males and females had similar views about what the other gender prefers. An overwhelming majority of males and females indicated agreement or strong agreement that the opposite sex prefers large breasts or pecs. Most participants endorse the belief that the opposite sex prefers tight, round buttocks. A large percentage of each sex agreed that tight, defined abdominal muscles are preferred by the opposite sex. Such responses imply that there is tremendous societal pressure on both men and women to maintain a physique that is firm and fit, in order to appeal to potential sexual partners. Unfortunately, for many this type of body is nearly impossible to achieve without substantial sacrifice.

Females seem more pressured to attain this ideal, yet whether this is strictly self-imposed or emanating from society is not clear. The results do suggest that females are much more concerned about having a perfect body than males. More women than men responded that they were dissatisfied with the shape of their buttocks. Women were more often distressed by their current weight, and had a strong desire to lose weight. While these factors alone may not indicate where the demanding female ideal originates, it appears that the media plays a significant role. The majority of females agreed that they often formulate negative comparisons between themselves and same sex media stars. In contrast, males were more inclined to indicate disagreement or neutrality in response to this question. This raises concern about the role of the media in degrading the fragile self-concept of many women today.

It appears that males aspire to muscular rather than thin physiques. Because a higher number of males feel the need to gain weight and have used dietary supplements such as creatine, it seems that males prefer having a "beefcake" or football player physique. This is in concordance with the findings of McKay Parks, and Read (1997).

Overall, this study implies that both genders are socialized to judge their bodies according to a standard set by the media and society. It appears that females judge themselves more harshly against these standards. Because of the numerous social activities that students report avoiding because they are self-conscious, it seems that society indirectly limits many individuals' freedom to enjoy life by promoting physical expectations they fail to meet. Students who feel

their bodies fail to match the norms sacrifice various opportunities for socialization and recreation.

College students are an interesting sample to study because they are typically young, intelligent, and liberal. Therefore, it is of interest to see how the exacting societal standards of attractiveness affect their standards. Future studies might involve a larger pool of subjects drawn from more varied populations. Another possibility would be to compare students drawn from a historically conservative campus with those of a more liberal campus.

Summary

This study found that women's opinion of the ideal female body shape was significantly thinner than the males' opinion of the ideal female. Compared to men, women were found to be more distressed over their current weight and to feel a stronger need to lose weight, while men were more likely to desire to gain weight and to have used dietary supplements for this. One noteworthy finding involved the perception of what the opposite sex finds attractive. Both men and women agree that the opposite sex desires large breasts or pectorals; tight, round buttocks; and tight, defined abdominal muscles. Females aggressively strive for these characteristics. The irony of this situation is that females also pursue a stringent standard of thinness which, many times, is associated with smaller breast size.

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